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DAVID HUME (1711-1776)

Introduction and overview of his project

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# DAVID HUME (1711-76): BIOGRAPHY

- Scottish, an “uncommon wake-minded” child, reads law at Edinburgh University
  - 1739-40 publishes *A Treatise of Human Nature* (albeit in “castrated” form)
    - According to Hume’s (somewhat exaggerated) report, the *Treatise* “fell still-born from the press”
  - 1748 publishes *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, a “recasting” of the *Treatise*; he follows up with the *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751)
  - Blocked from academic positions because of his growing reputation for skepticism and anti-clericalism
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# DAVID HUME (1711-76): BIOGRAPHY

- 1756 Starts the publication of the *History of England* in six volumes
    - Instant literary hit and best-seller
    - Hume finally becomes a great literary celebrity in Edinburgh, London and especially Paris
  - Friend of ...
    - Adam Smith
    - Anti-clerical French *philosophes* like Diderot, D'Alembert, D'Holbach
    - Jean-Jacques Rousseau (though this goes sour)
  - 1776 Dies of intestinal cancer in Edinburgh, famously facing death with peaceful cheer and declining to recant his irreligious views
  - 1779 A nephew arranges posthumous publication of *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*
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# HUME'S PHILOSOPHICAL AGENDA

(1) To introduce “*the experimental method of reasoning*” into the study of the mind, establishing a “*science of human nature*.”

- Attempts to explain the variety of mental phenomena through a small number of laws (after the manner of Newton).
  - These laws stress an **associationist** psychology, where one idea makes us think of another through Pavlovian habituation.
  - So Hume plays up nonrational association between ideas as the driving motor of our mental lives, rather than some higher faculty of reason or intellect. Much of our thought (including most of our scientific and logical reasoning) turns out simply to be governed by non-rational instincts and habits of mind.
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# HUME'S PHILOSOPHICAL AGENDA

*(continued)*

## **(2) Skeptical critique of the pretensions of reason**

- Following Locke, Hume thinks that “*all the materials of the mind are derived from our outward or inward [experience]*”; and that “*all [the] creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by experience.*” (EHU 2.5)
  - But, much more aggressively than Locke, Hume wants to use this empiricist point as a weapon to confound the dominant philosophical theories of the day, exposing the lack of cognitive content or meaning in their key notions.
  - He thus wants to bring out the skeptical consequences of the views of his empiricist predecessors.
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# HUME'S PHILOSOPHICAL AGENDA

*(continued)*

## (3) Promote naturalism

- Hume's approach to studying the human mind is **naturalistic**:
    - Humans are a part of nature, and therefore the student of the human mind must be a naturalist, studying humans in much the same way as other natural phenomena.
  - In particular, he rejects the view that humans are in some respects divine or *supernatural* beings, able to act outside of the natural order, for instance ...
    - through the use of a higher reason that is radically different from animal instinct,
    - a free will that defies the laws of nature,
    - a power to communicate with a supernatural reality through prayer or devotions,
    - or an immortal soul that survives bodily death.
  - Hume thinks such views are (i) false, and (ii) often harmful to society.
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